

**06/03/21 Thursday**

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Beijing, Hanoi Agree to Establish Naval Hotline to Resolve Emergencies in South China Sea by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the two nations have a history of sometimes-violent border disputes, China and Vietnam have emphasized the increasing importance of political and economic cooperation since normalizing relations in 1991. Nonetheless, Washington has tried to pry Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations away from working with China.

Chinese and Vietnamese naval leaders have agreed to set up a naval hotline as part of a larger effort to defuse tensions in the South China Sea. This comes after their respective heads of state recently agreed to improve diplomatic and trade relations, too.

Rear Admiral Tran Thanh Nghiem, Commander of the Vietnam People's Navy, held an online talk with Admiral Shen Jinlong, Commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy last week to discuss military relations between the two socialist nations, which are sometimes fraught with dispute and confrontation over competing claims to parts of the South China Sea.

According to the Vietnamese defense ministry's official [People's Army Newspaper](#), "the two sides agreed to enhance the sharing of information related to situations at sea and issues of mutual concern, study the possibility of setting up a hotline to connect the two navies, and maintain the joint patrol mechanism in the Gulf of Tonkin."

The People's Army Newspaper further notes that Nghiem hailed previous efforts at improving bilateral defense cooperation and the regular meetings between naval leaders, organization of patrols, and joint drills at sea.

Their meeting comes just days after Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc spoke on the phone, pledging to increase cooperation in a number of areas. "The two sides must continue to use a strategic and long-term perspective to view the relationship between the two parties and two countries, to anchor China-Vietnam relations in the correct direction," [Xi said, according](#) to a Chinese Foreign Ministry readout.

"The Chinese Communist Party and government will firmly adhere to the policy of friendship with Vietnam, and we appreciate the new leadership of Vietnam for continuing to give top priority to foreign relations with China," he added.

Xi said they should work to promote "high-quality synergy" between their bilateral "Two Corridors and One Economic Circle" plan, [which has struggled](#) to get off the ground, and the larger Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure megaproject.

Phuc, in turn, called for strengthening their cooperation on COVID-19, improving the quality and efficiency of their trade and investment cooperation, maintaining peace and stability at sea, handling maritime issues according to internationally defined rules, such as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and to continue coordinating at multilateral forums, [according to VN Express](#).

The two nations have significantly overlapping claims to parts of the South China Sea, with Vietnam claiming the Paracel Islands and most of the Spratly Islands, which China also claims. Their claims, in turn, overlap somewhat with those made by the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei, creating a fraught situation in which [nations have fortified](#) the tiny islands with radar sites, missiles, port and aircraft facilities.

The United States, [claiming it is upholding](#) an “international rules-based order” despite never having actually ratified the UNCLOS, has taken to performing regular “freedom of navigation operations” [that purposefully flout](#) Chinese and Vietnamese [maritime claims](#), as well as performing large military drills in the South China Sea. However, where Washington has tried to posture as standing up to Chinese expansionism, Beijing has been working with regional nations to reach a diplomatic solution.

The Code of Conduct in the South China Sea would standardize maritime interactions in the waterway, including the question of where each nation’s fishing fleets could go, but negotiations were paused due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have since [pledged to redouble](#) their efforts, and amid the dispute between the Philippines and China earlier this year over Chinese fishing boats near the disputed Whitesun Reef, [Manila and Beijing agreed](#) “to fully and effectively implement” the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties “and accelerate consultations on the ‘Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.’”

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US Flew 72 Reconnaissance Flights Over South China Sea in May, Double Last Year - Think Tank  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While Washington presents military confrontation as the only way to resolve South China Sea territorial disputes between China and other nations, Beijing has been coordinating with partners like Hanoi and Manila to hash out a universal code of conduct for the waterway.

According to a count by the South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a think tank connected to Peking University, the US flew 72 reconnaissance flights across the South China Sea in May. This was more than twice the number flown last year, which was just 35, itself an average of more than one flight per day.

The report breaks down the flights by type of aircraft. The most common were maritime patrol aircraft by P-8A Poseidons, which flew 32 missions last month. Several signals intelligence aircraft also made regular passes, with EP-3E Aires flying 16 missions and RC-135W Rivet Joints flying 12 missions.

SCSPI as noted five MQ-4 Triton unmanned aerial vehicle flights, four flights by the E-8 Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (Joint STARS), which carries a vast array of signals equipment and powerful battlefield mapping radars, and three flights by the RC-135U Combat Sent, an aircraft that specializes in tracking radar and early warning systems. The Pentagon only has two RC-135Us.

May was among the busiest of months ever recorded by the think tank, which noted an [all-time high](#) in February of 75 reconnaissance sorties by the United States that month. In April, the [number was 65](#) - still much higher than in prior years.

The number of flights has increased dramatically in recent years, as the US has [shifted its strategy](#) toward “great power confrontation” with China and Russia and identified the South China Sea as a place where China must be “contained.” Chinese maritime claims in the waterway contradict those of several other nations, many of which have [fortified the small islands](#) to which they have laid claim.

At times, the US aircraft have posed a danger to civilian planes flying through the area, such as in January when a US tanker [flew dangerously close](#) to a Taiwanese airliner after refueling a US spy plane, or the repeated habit of US [aircraft disguising themselves](#) as civilian jets by broadcasting fake transponder codes in order to surreptitiously fly close to Chinese airspace. The US Navy [didn't perform any](#) major exercises in the waterway last month, but US warships did carry out “freedom of navigation operations” near the Chinese-controlled [Paracel Islands](#) and pass through the Taiwan Strait separating autonomous Taiwan from the Chinese mainland - two provocative actions intended to demonstrate Washington's contempt for Beijing's claims over those islands.

SCSPI noted that the destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur engaging in both actions coincided with a period of heightened reconnaissance activity.

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Paris Suspends Military Cooperation With Mali Until Getting 'Guarantees' on Civilian Power Transfer

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

France's eight-year war against rebellious tribes in northern Mali has grown increasingly unpopular in both countries, with protests against the French military presence continuing through the interim government period.

In a statement [viewed by AFP](#) on Thursday, the French Ministry of Defense said that “requirements and red lines have been set by ECOWAS and the African Union to clarify the framework for the political transition in Mali.”

“While awaiting these guarantees, France has decided to suspend, as a temporary measure, joint military operations with Malian forces and national advisory missions for their benefit,” the ministry added. “These decisions will be re-evaluated in the coming days in the light of answers provided by the Malian authorities.”

Mali and the War on Terror

This move is just the latest in a slew of international agreements with Mali being paused due to Assimi Goita, a Malian Army colonel who masterminded the August 2020 coup d'etat, removing from power the interim president, prime minister, and defense minister last week.

On Sunday, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended Mali from the trading bloc, and on Tuesday, the African Union [did the same](#), calling for “an unimpeded,

transparent and swift return to the civilian-led transition ... failing which, the Council will not hesitate to impose targeted sanctions."

The US began restricting its assistance to [Bamako on May 26](#), just two days after then-Interim President Bah Ndaw, former Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, and former Defense Minister Souleymane Doucoure were arrested. As [Sputnik has reported](#), African troops trained by US Africa Command have been behind at least seven successful coups in the 13 years since AFRICOM was founded in 2008.

While France and the US have paused their cooperation with Mali, a former colony of Paris, the European Union has not yet done so. EU foreign policy chief [Josep Borrell said](#) last week "let's see how things are going," but noted he believed the situation in northern Mali would only worsen if the roughly 600 EU troops there withdrew.

France's force in Mali is far larger: under the aegis of Operation Barkhane, Paris has roughly 5,100 troops spread across the Sahel in a War on Terror-style campaign against Islamist militants. The war began in Mali in 2013 as Operation Serval, when France sent a force at the request of the Malian government to beat back an uprising by Tuareg tribesmen that spread like wildfire in the wake of another coup d'etat in Bamako in 2012.

Like the US War on Terror, this campaign has seen civilians targeted on the assumption they are militants, with the situation made all the worse by denials from Paris. For example, an [airstrike on the village](#) of Bounti on January 3 was said by the French defense ministry to have killed 40 men from an "armed terrorist group," but a United Nations investigation revealed the strike had hit a wedding reception and killed just 19 men, all of them unarmed. Another [instance in March](#) saw six teenagers who were bird hunting gunned down by a French aircraft near the village of Talataye, with Paris claiming the incident as a hit on "an armed terrorist group."

Civilian Rule, But Not 'Islamist' Civilians

On Sunday, French President Emmanuel Macron said that if the recent coup took a turn toward "radical Islamism," he would end military cooperation.

"Today, this temptation is present in Mali. But if it goes in that direction, I'll pull out," he told [Le Journal du Dimanche](#). "I stayed at the request of the countries, because I thought that exiting would be a destabilising factor. But the question is raised, and we're not destined to stay there forever."

The mass protest movement that weakened the administration of former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita over the summer of 2020, paving the way for the August military coup that ousted him, yielded an umbrella party of opposition forces called the June 5 Movement - Gathering of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP). The man who emerged as the leading voice of the movement, [Imam Mahmoud Dicko](#), is a conservative Muslim scholar and the former head of Mali's High Islamic Council.

However, Dicko and the M5-RFP as a whole have remained staunchly opposed to a military government, and since the coup have pressured Goita and the other colonels to give them a greater role in the government. When Ndaw yielded to this pressure and [ousted two colonels](#) as head of the defense and security ministries on May 24, Goita leaped into action and had him arrested just hours later.

On Tuesday, M5-RFP finally won a much-coveted position in the interim government when leader Choguel Maiga, who heads the Patriotic Movement for Renewal party and is a former minister of communications and trade, was appointed [to be prime minister](#). However, M5-RFP

still doesn't hold a single ministry post in the interim government, which remains dominated by the military.

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Israeli General Says 11-Day Gaza War Just 'First Stage' of Wider Campaign  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After the Second Intifada uprising and the 2006 election victory of Hamas in Gaza, Israel was forced to pull all its settlers out of the Gaza Strip, at which time it imposed a cordon sanitaire around the territory that has dramatically impacted access to basic necessities by its more than 2 million Palestinian inhabitants.

During an interview with Israel's Channel 13 on Thursday, Maj. Gen. Eliezer Toledano, head of the Israel Defense Forces' Southern Command, said that the IDF limited its recent war in Gaza due to civilian pressure "on the home front," but noted the military is "totally prepared" to continue if necessary.

"The operation ended, or at least its first stage did. The next stage will happen if we see that the security situation has changed," Toledano said, according to the [Times of Israel](#). That "first stage" involved roughly 1,500 airstrikes on targets in the Gaza Strip, which the IDF said targeted members of Hamas and the group's facilities. The group's militant wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, fired more than 4,300 rockets and mortars at Israel during the 11-day war. While most of Hamas' projectiles were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome air defense system, Gaza has few air defenses and the bombs fell on apartment buildings in the densely populated city, killing 254 people, 67 of whom were children and 80 of whom were militants, [according to local](#) health officials and Hamas. In Israel, 12 civilians, including two children, were killed by Hamas rockets.

Toledano said the IDF tried to "make the most" of the conflict while public opinion in Israel was on their side.

"We don't have operations like this every week or every month because we understand the burden that this puts on civilians, especially on the home front. And therefore when we launched this operation, we had to make the most of it," he said, adding that "these [wars are complicated](#) in terms of the rockets."

"We are totally prepared to continue from the 11th day, with the 12th day, with the 13th day. It's all contingent upon the security situation," he continued. "If we succeeded with this first stage, that's great. If we didn't, we'll have to continue."

Israel's previous major military operations in Gaza, in 2009 and 2014, each lasted several weeks and killed thousands of people, the vast majority of them Palestinians in Gaza, but also saw significantly increased numbers of Israeli civilians killed and injured as well.

In the aftermath of the May 20 ceasefire, both the IDF and Hamas [have claimed victory](#). Hamas called the operation "Sword of Jerusalem" and said its intent was to halt the attacks by Israeli police against worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque and in the Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh

Jarrah, where several Palestinian families are at risk of being evicted after an Israeli court ruled in favor of Jewish settlers.

However, while the IDF claimed to have destroyed large numbers of stockpiled rockets and Hamas infrastructure and shot down some 90% of the rockets launched, the [Times of Israel](#) said after the conflict that the IDF's "Operation Guardian of the Walls" had not been the resounding victory Jerusalem hoped for.

The wildcard now is the [Wednesday formation](#) of a government with New Right chief Naftali Bennett at the helm. While the right-wing figure [recently referred to](#) the bombardment of Gaza as part of Israel's "just war against terrorism," the kingmaker United Arab List, a small Palestinian party that helped the coalition to reach a majority in the Knesset, could be a moderating factor on some of Bennett's more aggressive intentions.

A Palestinian party has never before been part of an Israeli government, and leader Mansour Abbas said on Wednesday that he only agreed to join the coalition after reaching "critical agreements on various issues that serve the interests of Arab society," including education, welfare, employment, economic development, planning, construction, and crime and violence, [according to Haaretz](#), as well as granting official status to [Arab Bedouin settlements](#) in the Negev Desert.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been head of the Israeli government for 12 years, [warned right-wing members](#) of the Knesset on Thursday to oppose what he characterized as a "dangerous left-wing government" coming into power, saying it was "selling" the Negev to the Bedouin.

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Ex-CDC Chief Says He Received Death Threats From Scientists After Saying COVID Likely 'Escaped' Lab  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Dr. Robert Redfield, the former director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) told CNN earlier this year that the novel coronavirus was "most likely" contained in a laboratory and somehow "escaped." During the same interview, Redfield stressed that he was not implying "intentionality," or that the virus was man-made.

Redfield recently revealed to Vanity Fair that he was ostracized and subjected to death threats by politicians, and even scientists, following a pre-recorded interview on CNN that aired in March.

"I was threatened and ostracized because I proposed another hypothesis," said Redfield, who is a virologist by training. "I expected it from politicians. I didn't expect it from science."

During the interview in question, the former director of the CDC floated that the virus was somehow released from a lab around Wuhan, China. He also suggested that the virus could have been transmitted from person-to-person around September 2019 or October 2019.

"I am of the point of view that I still think the most likely etiology of this pathogen in Wuhan was from a laboratory, you know, escaped," [Redfield said](#) to CNN's Sanjay Gupta.

It's worth noting that the interview was conducted in January, but did not air until late March. "Now, other people don't believe that, that's fine. Science will eventually figure it out," he added. "It's not unusual for respiratory pathogens that are being worked on in the laboratory to infect the laboratory worker."

Redfield also highlighted that he is not convinced that the novel coronavirus originated from bat-to-human contact, as COVID-19 quickly became "one of the most infectious viruses that we know in humanity for human to human transmission."

"Normally, when a pathogen goes from a zoonotic to human, it takes a while for it to figure out how to become more and more efficient," he said.

As scientists around the world continue to search for answers, US President Joe Biden has ordered the nation's intelligence community to "[redouble](#)" their collection and analyses of information that could lead to a "definitive conclusion."

Officials have been asked to report back within 90 days from May 26.

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Less Miles, More Mortality: US Traffic Deaths Reached 13-Year High in 2020, NHTSA Reports by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this year, the National Safety Council issued a similar report detailing that some 42,060 motor-vehicle deaths occurred in 2020, amounting to an 8% uptick from the previous year. At the time, the nonprofit theorized that "the pandemic appears to be taking our eyes off the ball when it comes to traffic safety."

The US Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) on Thursday released its [preliminary estimates report](#) on crash fatalities in 2020.

Per the 'Early Estimate of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities in 2020' report, though Americans drove less during the COVID-19 pandemic, some 38,680 individuals died in motor vehicle crashes last year.

Comparatively, the NHTSA reported [36,096 fatalities](#) in 2019, amounting to a 7.2% increase for 2020.

The 2020 fatality estimate amounts to the highest NHTSA projection since 2017.

The 13-year high comes alongside a 13.2% yearly decrease in 'vehicle miles traveled,' per Federal Highway Administration data.

According to the NHTSA, there were significant increases in three major categories for 2020 traffic fatalities: passenger vehicle occupants (23,395, up 5% from 2019); motorcyclists (5,015, up 9%); and bicyclists (846, up 5%).

Impaired driving, failure to wear a seatbelt and speeding were listed as the primary contributing factor to the uptick in traffic deaths.

Dr. Steven Cliff, the NHTSA's Acting Administrator, said in a quoted statement that the government agency intends "to use all available tools to reverse these trends and reduce traffic fatalities and injuries."

He went on to state that US President Joe Biden's ['American Jobs Plan'](#) will offer "an additional \$19 billion in vital funding to improve road safety for all users, including people walking and biking."

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Lara Trump: Despite Reports, 'No Plans' for Trump to Be Reinstated as US President by August by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week New York Times journalist Maggie Haberman tweeted that former US President Donald Trump has been telling allies that he will be reinstated as US president by August. The report came alongside former national security adviser Michael Flynn's suggestion that a Myanmar-esque coup "should happen" in the US.

Lara Trump, host of Trump Productions' Real News Update, has pushed back against [allegations](#) of her father-in-law being reinstated as president of the US.

"As far as I know, there are no plans for Donald Trump to be in the White House in August. Maybe there's something I don't know," Lara Trump, who is also a Fox News contributor, told the hosts of ["Fox & Friends"](#) on Thursday.

"But no, I think that that is a lot of folks getting a little worked up about something just because maybe there wasn't enough pushback, you know, from the Republican side," she suggested. "So no, I have not heard any plans for Donald Trump to be installed in the White House in August."

The report can be traced back to a tweet by Maggie Haberman.

"Trump has been telling a number of people he's in contact with that he expects he will get reinstated by August (no that isn't how it works but simply sharing the information)," she tweeted.

The Times reporter's tweet quoted a video clip of a CNN news report on Flynn's recent [military coup comments](#).

"I want to know why what happened in Myanmar can't happen here?" he asked attendees of an event organized by QAnon supporters. "No reason. I mean, it should happen here."

Flynn has since denied that he supports such an act.

"There is no reason whatsoever for any coup in America, and I do not and have not at any time called for any action of that sort," the former national security adviser wrote on [Telegram](#).

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US Daily COVID-19 Cases, Death Toll Hit Their Lowest Record Since Start of Pandemic by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US imposed a variety of preventative measures in an effort to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, with protocols recently allowing Americans to resume some pre-pandemic normalcy. It was previously declared that those fully vaccinated no longer needed to adhere to masking guidelines in most cases.

The daily count of COVID-19 cases and the deadly virus' associated death toll has hit a new low in the US amid a nationwide effort for Americans to vaccinate themselves from the respiratory illness, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed on Thursday. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky remarked during the US health agency's [Thursday briefing](#) that the seven-day average of US COVID-19 cases has plummeted to less than 16,000 cases per day, effectively marking the lowest level of recorded cases since the pandemic was declared in March 2020.

"Our seven-day average is about 15,600 cases per day. This represents a decrease of more than 30% from our prior seven-day average," Walensky remarked during the briefing. "More importantly, it is a 94% decrease from the peak of COVID-19 cases we reported in January of this year."

Walensky also noted that the agency had documented "a little over 9,300 new cases" on Wednesday alone, and that the seven-day average for hospitalization has dropped by roughly 83% since early January. Additionally, it was highlighted that the seven-day average for daily COVID-19-related deaths fell by 16% when compared against the previous week's figures.

"This is the type of news I like to deliver, and certainly, these data are encouraging and uplifting as we battle this pandemic," Walensky remarked during the event.

The CDC director also took the opportunity to urge teens and young adolescents to be vaccinated against the virus after "troubling data" showed that a "number" of young Americans had to be placed on a ventilator after contracting SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19. The CDC is expected to release additional information on the matter on Friday.

The latest commentary from the CDC came on the heels of a [recent initiative](#) by the Biden administration meant to incentivize Americans to vaccinate themselves against COVID-19. US President Joe Biden declared on Wednesday that July would be a "month of action" that would see Americans be given everything, from free beer to child care and sports tickets, in order to give vaccination rates a boost.

The goal itself is part of Biden's bid to have 70% of US adults receive at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by July 4. The CDC's [latest figures](#) show that only 62.9% of those aged over 18 have been given at least one dose, as just 51.9% have been fully vaccinated in the US.

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So Long, Farewell - Cartoon

In a bid to circumvent his restricted access to various social media networks, former US President Donald Trump launched his own communication platform meant to serve as a place to "speak freely and safely." The platform had been dubbed, "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump."

The communication blog launched by the former president as a place where he could share his statements with the larger public has been permanently shuttered less than a month after going live, it was recently revealed.

Jason Miller, a senior Trump aide who serves as the former commander-in-chief's spokesperson, [confirmed](#) on Wednesday that the platform was now defunct. He told CNBC that the page "will not be returning," and that "it was just auxiliary to the broader efforts we have and are working on."

Miller [later relayed](#) to the outlet that the departure stemmed from Trump getting ready to join another social media platform.

Trump was famously booted off of Facebook and Twitter in early January, after hundreds of people, including his supporters, opted to storm the US Capitol in an effort to halt congressional lawmakers from certifying the results of the US election.

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UN Representatives Declare Crippling Sanctions Have Caused Human Rights Violations Amid Pandemic

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated grievances and concerns, as well as cooperation, in establishing goals directed at enhancing global peace and security. To date, there has not been an established, tactful form of retaliation for disagreements concerning human rights, except for Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCM) or sanctions.

UN representatives declared during a [Thursday virtual event](#) that economic sanctions have caused human rights violations by obstructing access to the updated health systems, technology and humanitarian aid needed to sustain global infrastructure.

The virtual event was hosted by the Permanent Mission of Iran to the United Nations (UN), and was geared towards addressing the impact of sanctions on international health systems, specifically the effects such measures have on certain countries most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many nations, including Russia, China and Iran, came together to urge the United States, United Kingdom, EU and other countries to end their enforcement of UCMs, which are shown to have a negative impact on the national health systems of targeted developing countries.

In particular, panelists from the Human Rights Council, Iran and Belarus cited the negative impact on the health and well-being of women, children, persons with disabilities and other individuals living in vulnerable situations.

The obstruction of humanitarian aid and medical supplies are marked as having a negative impact on the rights to development, access to health and rights to self-determination in violation of humanitarian rights and policies established by the UN Charter and Human Rights Council.

“The issue of health is a fundamental aspect of internationally-recognized human rights,” Zamir Akram, the chair rapporteur of the Human Rights Council, said during the virtual meeting, adding that some sanctions often resulted in retaliatory obstacles that impeded adequate help in situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Countries have the right to cooperate with each other in ensuring development and eliminating the obstacles of development,” he maintained, while suggesting means of combating the negative impact through the draft of [Resolution 39/9](#), a binding instrument meant to legally address the impact that UCMs have on the right to development.

The virtual event was co-hosted by several missions to the UN, including Zimbabwe, Cuba, Venezuela and Syria, who have all repeatedly faced an increase in sanctions that resulted in unstable national infrastructure.

China’s UN Representative Declares ‘Unilateral Sanctions Are Illegal’

Many of the participating countries maintained that sanctions are illegal and are being used as a political tool to enforce restrictions on global trade, arguing that the financial restrictions also push forward a unilateral agenda, especially amid the pandemic, which has only exacerbated the negative impact of sanctions.

“Unilateral sanctions are illegal,” Zhang Jun, permanent representative of China to the UN said, adding that UCMs are “man-made.” The official also called for the lifting of sanctions in order to meet humanitarian needs and uphold multilateralism.

China has recently instilled their own restrictions on several [international brands](#), all of which came from countries responsible for sanctions against China’s Xinjiang cotton, as it represents a high portion of the country’s trade revenue.

Samuel Moncada, the permanent representative of Venezuela to the UN, echoed Zhang’s sentiments, underscoring that sanctions were being deliberately used during the pandemic to further increase pressures of regime change within vulnerable governments.

“It is the next level of silent weapons of mass destruction in the field of public health,” Moncada added, backing [recent calls](#) from the head of the World Health Organization to create an international treaty on pandemic preparedness and response.

Additionally, Moncada called for immediate action to create a platform that would help coordinate commercial, economic and financial strategies geared towards breaking free of international channels that control the flow of legal transactions related to those within the UCMs.

“Belarus continues to support the mandate on the negative impact of UCMs. We fully support the initiative of Venezuela to form activities against UCMs,” Valentine Rybakov, the permanent representative of Belarus, to the UN commented, citing the [negative impact](#) of sanctions placed on the country following its August 2020 presidential elections.

Disagreements Emerge Over Human Rights Violation Claims

Two permanent members of the UN Security Council, Russia and the United Kingdom, disagreed on the intended purposes of the sanctions, with Russia maintaining that it was being used for political purposes in pushing a unilateral agenda. Representatives for the UK upheld that sanctions are tapped as part of an effort to deter human rights violations, especially during the pandemic.

"We use UCM as a targeted foreign policy tool to deter behavior," said David Kinna, who serves as the first secretary of the UK to the UN, citing sanctions against Myanmar for the February 1 military coup.

Deputy Permanent Representative to Russia Dmitry Chumakov drew reference to sanctions placed on Cuban medical teams who attempted to provide assistance to countries with limited health systems during the pandemic.

The inability for some countries to receive updated medical and technological equipment during the pandemic due to sanctions have resulted in what Dr. Janet Blake, professor of international and human rights at the Shahid Beheshti University in Iran's Tehran, deemed an "attack on peace and security, development and human rights" during the virtual meeting.

'Unjust Reality', Sanctions on Syria Cause Increased Concern over Negative Impact

Both the UK and EU agreed on the need for humanitarian assistance amid the pandemic, but upheld the notion that sanctions are targeted in a way meant to protect human rights.

"EU sanctions are not meant to impede humanitarian aid," Simona Popan, who serves as a member of the legal department of the European External Action Service, added. However, she later agreed with the decision to place sanctions on Syria for the alleged use of chemical weapons against vulnerable populations, such as women and children.

Syria has suffered crippling socio-economic impact due to sanctions that have impeded access to updated medical equipment. Although a formal representative to the US was not present to confirm, dozens of member states have sent a letter to US President Joe Biden urging a lifting of the sanctions in Syria, Chumakov remarked during the proceedings. Sanctions placed on Syria have been shown to have a negative impact on access to health.

"Any mention of the humanitarian exemption are [sic] an illusion created to divert public opinion from the unjust reality caused by these actions," Bassam Sabbagh, permanent representative of Syria to the UN, maintained.

Dr. Alena Douhan, the special rapporteur on the negative impact of UCMs on the enjoyment of human rights, argued that facts were important in showing the increased negative impact sanctions had on already dire situations. She further suggested the establishment of a database to record the impacts of sanctions on vulnerable populations.

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Canada, Catholic Church Must Probe Mass Grave of Indigenous Children – UN Rights Officials

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – Canada and the authorities of the Catholic Church must launch an immediate investigation into the discovery of a mass grave of more than 200 children found at a school for indigenous, or First Nation, children in British Columbia, nine senior UN diplomats dealing with abuse of children and disappearances said on Friday.

"We urge the authorities to conduct full-fledged investigations into the circumstances and responsibilities surrounding these deaths, including forensic examinations of the remains found, and to proceed to the identification and registration of the missing children," the officials said accord to a release from the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR).

The officials included Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples Francisco Cali Tzay, Special Rapporteur on the sale and exploitation of children Mama Fatima Singhateh, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial and arbitrary executions Morris Tidball-Binz and Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer.

The UN officials, who also included the OHCHR Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, also called on the Canadian government "to undertake similar investigations in all other Indigenous residential schools in the country", recalling the right of victims to know the full extent of the truth about the violations endured.

On Wednesday, Canadian Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett announced that the government has earmarked a \$22.4 million fund to study former residential schools for potential sites such as those found in British Columbia.

The Kamloops Indian Residential School, where the children's remains were found, was run by the Catholic Church from the late 19th century to the late 1960s, when the federal government took over until its closure in the 1970s. The 2015 report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission determined that Aboriginal children were subjected to abuse, malnutrition and rape and that at least 4,000 died while at such schools.

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Canada Loses 68,000 Jobs in May, Unemployment Rises to 8.2% - Survey

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – Employment in Canada fell by 68,000 or 0.4 percent in May adding to a decline of 207,000 in April and resulted in the unemployment rate increase to 8.2 percent amid the third wave of coronavirus health restrictions, the state statistics agency said on Friday.

"Employment fell by 68,000 (-0.4%) in May, adding to a decline of 207,000 in April. The unemployment rate was little changed at 8.2%," Statistics Canada said in its monthly Labor Force Survey. "Ontario and Nova Scotia accounted for most of the overall employment decline in May."

The survey found that the number of people employed in manufacturing fell by 36,000 or 2 percent in May making it the first decline in the industry since April 2020.

The Canada economy also saw a decline in retail (-29,000) and "other services" (-24,000) employment due to the ongoing public health restrictions, according to the survey results.

In May, the total number of employed Canadians was 18.56 million compared to 18.8 million in March that marked the highest employment rate since the beginning of pandemic.

Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole blamed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his government for the job losses, admonishing the Canadian leader for a faltering vaccination regime that he says spurred the latest wave of the pandemic that is not being felt in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom.

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US Adds 559,000 Jobs in May, Unemployment Down to 5.8% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States saw 559,000 new jobs in May and the unemployment rate fell to 5.8 percent, the Labor Department said Friday, but economists expressed disappointment with the job additions that came in sharply below forecast in a labor market still struggling to shake off the coronavirus pandemic.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 559,000 in May, and the unemployment rate declined by 0.3 percentage point to 5.8 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a statement.

In April, there were 266,000 job additions, while the unemployment rate was at 6.1 percent. But the job gains for May still fell 115,000 short of the 674,000 forecast by analysts, making what the Labor Department reported somewhat underwhelming.

"This is a disappointing number but it's not some kind of catastrophe, it's well within the accepted range," economist Adam Button said in a comment on ForexLive. "The drop in the unemployment rate is only because of falling labor force participation, which isn't something you want to see. That said, I would have hoped that the April-May reopening in the US economy would have led to much more than an average of 418,000 jobs in those two months."

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the biggest challenges of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 8 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021, released last week by the Commerce Department, showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Fed has forecast an economic growth of 6.5 percent for all of 2021 although Chairman Powell said he did not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to return before 2023.

And while the economy itself has been recovering, a rash of US data, from consumer spending to home sales, have exceeded forecasts in recent months, putting upward pressure on prices.

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US Says Houthis Bear Major Responsibility in Yemen Conflict

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – The Houthis bearing "major responsibility" in protracted armed conflict in Yemen, US State Department said in a notice Friday after Special Envoy Tim Lederking's trip to the region.

"While there are numerous problematic actors inside of Yemen, the Houthis bear major responsibility for refusing to engage meaningfully on a ceasefire and to take steps to resolve a

nearly seven-year conflict that has brought unimaginable suffering to the Yemeni people," the notice said.

Washington accused Houthis of continuing offensive on Marib and other devastating moves. During his trip to the region, Lenderking visited Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE, and Jordan, where he met with senior officials along with Yemeni representatives.

"During his meetings with Yemenis, Lenderking also discussed the need to strengthen inclusive processes that enable the country's citizens to discuss the future of their country and amplify voices for peace," the notice said.

He also discussed the humanitarian and economic crisis in Yemen and the urgent need for a comprehensive ceasefire, it added.

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US Added 559,000 Jobs in May, Unemployment Rate Declines to 5.8% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The US unemployment rate fell to 5.8 percent in May as the country added 559,000 jobs in an economy swiftly emerging from the coronavirus pandemic, the Labor Department announced on Friday.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 559,000 in May, and the unemployment rate declined by 0.3 percentage point to 5.8 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a statement.

In April, there were 266,000 job additions, while the unemployment rate was at 6.1 percent.

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UN World Food Program Cuts Aid to Syrian Refugees in Jordan Amid Funding Shortage

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The UN World Food Program (WFP) said funding shortages have caused it to scale back its food assistance programs for Syrian refugees living in Jordan, the organization stated on Thursday.

"[R]esources still fall well short of meeting the needs of all vulnerable refugees in Jordan. WFP urgently needs US\$58 million to continue food assistance until the end of the year for the half million refugees it supports," the WFP said.

WFP Country Director in Jordan Alberto Correia Mendes added that the organization may have to cut food assistance to another 250,000 refugees by September if it does not receive the needed financial contributions.

Mendes said the WFP needs \$58 million to continue its program in Jordan until the end of 2021. The WFP noted that the cuts are coming at a bad time due to the increased number of families who are struggling to earn money or have lost their jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic measures.

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#### **Austin in Talks With Israeli Counterpart Calls for Lasting Security in Conflict With Gaza**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a meeting with his Israeli counterpart Benny Gantz called on Israel and the Palestinian Hamas movement to build on the latest ceasefire to ensure lasting security in the region.

"Now going forward, we seek lasting security for Israelis and Palestinians alike. And I want to stress the importance of reducing tensions in the West Bank and Jerusalem and of supporting humanitarian and reconstruction assistance for Gaza that benefits the innocent people who live there," Austin said during the opening remarks of the meeting at the Pentagon on Thursday. Austin underscored that the Defense Department supports President Joe Biden's goal of a two-state solution.

Gantz agreed that diplomatic work is important in order to prevent or delay another military conflict with Hamas.

In addition, Gantz emphasized that Iran is the main concern in the Middle East as it continues to develop nuclear weapons and backs militia activities throughout the region.

Austin said the Biden administration is committed to maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge in the region and will ensure it can defend itself against threats in the region, especially those from Iran.

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#### **Canada's Ontario to Allow COVID-19 Vaccine Mixing, Matching Beginning Friday - Statement**

TORONTO, June 3 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario will begin allowing residents to mix and match vaccines following updated guidance from the National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI).

On Tuesday, NACI recommended relaxing rules governing the interchangeability of second coronavirus vaccine doses, saying that Canadians, who received the Oxford-AstraZeneca or its Indian analogue COVISHIELD, can receive an messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine for their second shot, namely the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna shots.

"Effective June 4, 2021 and in alignment with NACI's recommendation, Ontarians who have received their first dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine can choose to either receive a second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine, or an mRNA (Pfizer or Moderna) vaccine for their second dose," the province said in a statement on Thursday.

Those who wish to receive the second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine should contact the pharmacy or primary care provider where they received their first dose, the statement read.

NACI's decision to offer an mRNA vaccine for the second dose was made after experts studied the risk of Canadians' developing Vaccine-Induced Immune Thrombotic Thrombocytopenia following vaccination with the UK drugmaker's vaccine and the risk of complications pertinent to vaccine mixing.

Additionally, Ontario said it stands by the advisory panel's recommendation that first and second mRNA vaccine doses should come from the same manufacturer, however, in the event of supply shortages the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines can be considered interchangeable. Canada's vaccination regime has faced repeated setbacks, with the country experiencing a shortage of doses, despite the Trudeau government lauding deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers.

The vaccination program has also been undermined by inconsistent messaging and Canadian health officials' decision to delay the time between vaccinations for up to four months.

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#### Meat Producer JBS USA Says Its Global Facilities 'Fully Operational' After Cyberattack

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - Meat-producing giant JBS USA said in a press release that all of its global facilities are fully operational after a cyberattack that occurred earlier this week. "Today, JBS USA and Pilgrim's announced that all of its global facilities are fully operational after resolution of the criminal cyberattack on Sunday, May 30," the company said on Thursday. On Tuesday, the White House said it was in touch with the Russian authorities in light of the hacking attack on JBS, which led to the closure of its facilities in the United States. The Biden administration believes some of the members belonging to the cybercriminal group reside in Russia.

The FBI told Sputnik earlier that the hackers used REvil and Sodinokibi malware during the cyberattack.

JBS USA lost about one day's worth of food production in its US facilities and any lost production across the company's global plants will be fully recovered by the end of next week, the release said.

The company does not have any evidence that any customer, supplier or employee data has been compromised or misused as a result of the hack, the release added.

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#### US, French National Security Advisers Discuss Ransomware, Terror Threats - White House

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan discussed ransomware and terrorism threats with his French counterpart Emmanuel Bonne, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said.

"Today, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met in Washington with Emmanuel Bonne, National Security Advisor to the President of France, to exchange views on a range of shared global policy issues," Horne said in a statement on Thursday. "They discussed... malicious cyber activity such as ransomware, and terrorism."

Sullivan and Bonne also talked about the upcoming Group of Seven leaders meeting and NATO Summit, the statement said.

"Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Bonne agreed to continue coordinating on global access to COVID-19 vaccines and supporting negotiations to address the tax challenges arising from globalization," the statement added.

The two national security officials also discussed their work to strengthen and modernize NATO as well as Russia, China, Iran and the Sahel, according to the statement.

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#### UNSC Calls on Houthis to Urgently Provide Safe Access to Oil Tanker on Brink of Explosion

UNITED NATIONS, June 3 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council issued a statement calling on the Houthi rebel movement to urgently facilitate unconditional and safe access for a United Nations technical mission to the decaying oil tanker off the coast of Yemen.

"The members of the Security Council... stressed the need to urgently resolve outstanding issues and called on the Houthis to facilitate unconditional and safe access for UN experts to conduct the comprehensive and impartial assessment and initial repair mission without further delay," the statement said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council addressed in open and closed consultations the situation with the oil tanker Safer that has been abandoned in the Red Sea for more than six years while loaded with 1.1 million barrels of oil and remains in urgent need of repairs.

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Director of Operations and Advocacy Reena Ghelani told the Security Council the tanker's physical structure has been degrading and underlying systems had ceased to work.

Ghelani also said there is a "good chance" flammable gases are building up in some places of the vessel.

However, the Houthis have showed reluctance to provide specific assurances to the United Nations for the world body to send the repair mission on the vessel.

"The main sticking point seems to be what, exactly, the UN mission will do and – more specifically – why the United Nations cannot agree more in terms of repairs," Ghelani said.

"But because the UN has never been allowed to visit the site, we do not know exactly what the conditions are like onboard," Ghelani added.

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Canada Stiffens Hotel Quarantine Opt-Out Penalties Despite Recommendation to End Program

TORONTO, June 3 (Sputnik) - Canada will stiffen penalties for entrants not complying with the country's Quarantine Act, namely with those who bypass the controversial hotel quarantine requirement, the federal government said in an updated travel advisory.

"The Contraventions Act provides police... the authority to enforce the Quarantine Act. Tickets with fines of up to \$3,000 [US\$2477.49] may be issued for non-compliance. As of June 4, 2021, these tickets carry an increased fine of \$5,000 [US\$4129.15]," the travel advisory said on Thursday.

The new guidance flies in the face of recommendations from an expert panel convened by the health ministry that called on the federal government to drop its hotel quarantine mandate.

The contentious program is currently being tested in court with the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, Rebel News and journalist Kean Bexte arguing that the quarantine regime violates Canadians' charter rights and is unconstitutional.

Lawyers for the Canadian government have argued that the program is based on scientific evidence that it limits the spread of the novel coronavirus and is more lenient than measures implemented in other countries.

Although the Canadian government is constitutionally prohibited from barring citizens from leaving the country, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has used the enhanced border security measures to discourage international travel amid the coronavirus pandemic. Apart from the hotel quarantine requirement, all entrants into Canada must also complete a mandatory 14-day quarantine. As of March 25, 2020, Quarantine Act violators may be subject to a fine of up to \$537,000 and/or imprisonment for six months.

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### Oshkosh Defense Wins Nearly \$943M In Order for Stryker Combat Vehicles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - Oshkosh Defense has won a \$942.9 million US Army contract for the production, integration, engineering and logistical support, and fielding of Stryker Medium Caliber Weapon System vehicles, the US Defense Department announced.

"Oshkosh Defense, Oshkosh, Wisconsin was awarded a \$942.9 million... contract for procurement of the production, integration, engineering and logistical support, and fielding of Stryker Medium Caliber Weapon System vehicles," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The Defense Department explained that bids for the contract were solicited via the internet with three received. Work locations and funding will be determined with each order, with an estimated completion date of June 2, 2027.

The Stryker is a family of eight-wheeled armored fighting vehicles produced by General Dynamics Land Systems for the US Army. The vehicles include a new hull configuration, increased armor, upgraded suspension and braking systems, wider tires, blast-attenuating seats and a height management system, according to published reports.

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### US Prosecution Sees \$1.5M In Damages to Capitol From January 6 Unrest - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US prosecutors appraised damages to the Capitol from the January 6 unrest at almost \$1.5 million and solicit restitutions from defendants in the case, the Washington Post reported.

The report quoted on Thursday a plea agreement with Paul Hodgkins from Florida who acknowledged that "the riot... caused as of May 17, 2021, approximately \$1,495,326.55 damage to the United States Capitol."

According to several defense lawyers, the US attorney's office in Washington, DC, seeks to require restitution of \$2,000 in each felony case and \$500 in each misdemeanor case, the report said.

On January 6, a group of former US President Donald Trump's supporters entered the Capitol to protest the congressional certification of Joe Biden's election victory in several US states Trump claimed were illegitimate. In the four months since the event, about 440 individuals have been arrested with more than 125 charged on charges of trespassing, impeding law enforcement and assaulting a police officer.

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### Canada's NDP Pushes Government to Drop Legal Battle Against Residential School Survivors

TORONTO, June 3 (Sputnik) - Canada's opposition New Democrat Party (NDP) is pushing the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to abandon the legal battle against indigenous residential school survivors following the discovery of a mass grave at a former school site in British Columbia.

The Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation, which discovered the remains of 215 children on the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, filed a class-action lawsuit against the federal government in 2012 seeking reparations for the damage inflicted upon First Nations culture. However, government lawyers have maintained that Ottawa is not liable for the damage done to the First Nation indigenous culture.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh has introduced a motion in the House of Commons that calls on the governing Liberals to "cease its belligerent and litigious approach to justice for indigenous children by immediately dropping its appeal before the Federal Court."

"The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal has ruled that Canada has discriminated against indigenous children's rights, despite this the prime minister continues to take indigenous children to court. Will the prime minister support our motion and stop taking indigenous children to court? Yes or no," Singh asked during Thursday's Question Period session.

Indigenous Services Minister Marc Miller, speaking on behalf of Trudeau, who was absent from the session, sidestepped the question by saying the federal government is intent on compensating the survivors of the residential school system.

The grisly discovery has prompted politicians and indigenous leaders across the country to call for action.

Trudeau said on Tuesday that Canada has failed the country's indigenous community, namely the children whose remains were found at the mass grave site.

On Monday, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde urged the authorities to launch a probe into all former residential school sites, noting that indigenous survivors have long been trying to draw attention to the issue but nobody believed them.

Kamloops was one of the largest schools in Canada and operated from the late 19th century to the late 1970s as part of the residential school system, which placed indigenous children in state-sanctioned boarding schools where they were to be culturally assimilated.

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report released in 2015, roughly 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly assimilated through the residential schools from 1883 to 1998.

The report discovered that around 3,200 died in the schools, with the greatest number of deaths taking place before 1940. Schools also had high rates of tuberculosis and other health incidences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with death rates remaining high until the 1950s.

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China Owes US, World \$10 Trillion in Reparations for Creating COVID-19 - Trump

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump responded to newfound credibility of allegations that China created the novel coronavirus in a biological research laboratory by putting a price on damage to the United States and the world at \$10 trillion, according to a statement issued by the former US president's Save America organization.

"Now everybody, even the so-called 'enemy,' are beginning to say that President Trump was right about the China virus coming from the Wuhan Lab," the statement attributed to Trump said. "China should pay 10 Trillion dollars to America and the world for the death and destruction they have caused."

It was not clear whether the term "enemy" referred to the news media, Democrats or others with animosity toward the former president.

The statement also referenced a trove of emails by National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease Director Anthony Fauci from early in the pandemic to several US media outlets as speaking "too loudly for anyone to ignore." The emails show Fauci discussing allegations that the disease was created by China's Wuhan Institute of Virology as credible.

President Joe Biden recently ordered the US intelligence community to produce a report re-examining the origins of the novel coronavirus.

China continues to call the laboratory-leak theory a conspiracy.

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#### Two US Senators Propose Creating Regional Nuclear Fuel Bank in Persian Gulf

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US Senators Bob Menendez and Lindsey Graham proposed in an opinion-editorial piece creating a regional nuclear fuel bank as an alternative to the failed 2015 Iran nuclear agreement in order to provide safe atomic power for countries that require it. "If the Iranian leaders truly desire a peaceful nuclear program, then they ought to welcome the creation of a nuclear fuel bank for the Persian Gulf region," the senators wrote on Thursday. "A regional nuclear fuel bank could provide a reliable, affordable and transparent source of nuclear fuel for any state that sought a peaceful commercial nuclear program."

Menendez and Graham said they believe this new approach will allow the nuclear issue to "multilateralize" and stop the nuclear arms race in the Middle East while finding a bipartisan support in the United States.

The senators underscored that if the United States wants to see more concessions from Iran, it should be ready to provide more sanctions relief in return for encouraging broader negotiations to curb Tehran's allegedly malign influence in the region.

The first regional nuclear fuel bank was established in August 2017 in Kazakhstan by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to guarantee access to uranium in case of any disruptions in fuel deliveries.

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## Austin Praises Support on Afghan Pullout in Call With Qatar Defense Chief - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin praised Qatar's support in the Afghan peace process and the United States' continuing full military withdrawal from that country in a phone conversation with the Gulf nation's defense chief Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III spoke by phone with Qatar Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defense Affairs... Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah to reaffirm the strength of the US-Qatar defense partnership," Kirby said in a readout on Thursday. "He thanked Qatar for its support as the US military continues its retrograde from Afghanistan, and for the important role it continues to play in advancing the Afghan peace process.

Austin also thanked Attiyah for Qatar's continued hospitality in hosting US forces in Qatar, and emphasized the value of the US presence at Qatar's Al-Udeid Air Base, the readout said.

The two leaders also discussed shared interests in achieving regional security and stability, the readout added.

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## SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) -

### RUSSIA'S DECISION ON US DOLLAR

\* The Russian Ministry of Finance will introduce changes to the structure of the National Wealth Fund within a month in which the share of the US dollar will decrease to zero, the share of the British pound sterling to 5 percent, the share of Japan's yen will remain unchanged at 5 percent, the share of euro will grow to 40 percent and the share of Chinese yuan will grow to 30 percent, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said on Thursday.

\* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the process of abandoning the use of the dollar is visible when asked about the decision to reduce the share of the dollar in Russia's national wealth fund to zero.

### IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

\* The United States expects the sixth and additional rounds of negotiations on the resumption of the Iranian nuclear agreement, US State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

### BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

\* Roman Protasevich, co-founder of the Nexta Telegram channel the Belarus authorities have designated as being extremist, said in an interview he had pleaded guilty on charges of organizing unauthorized protests after the country's presidential election and of publishing calls to take to the streets.

\* Protasevich said that he had spoken with the leader of the Belarusian opposition, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, about people who were ready for a forceful change of power in Belarus.

#### US-RUSSIA SUMMIT

\* The meeting between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin after the NATO summit in Brussels is in the interests of the alliance, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday.

#### CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

\* US Vice President Kamala Harris has notified the heads of Mexico, Guatemala, India and the Caribbean Community countries of the United States' plans to distribute 25 million doses of coronavirus vaccines, White House chief spokesperson Symone Sanders said on Thursday.

\* The Belarusian Health Ministry said that the country had made a decision on state registration of coronavirus vaccine Sputnik Light.

\* The United States will deliver some 6 million coronavirus vaccine doses to its partners, including to Mexico, Ukraine, Iraq and the Gaza Strip, US President Joe Biden announced.

#### SYRIA

\* Syria could hold an early vote if the government and the opposition forces reach agreement on a new constitution and carry out a constitutional reform, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said on Thursday.

\* Russia expects that the drafting group of the Syrian Constitutional Committee will soon convene for the next round of talks in Geneva, Bogdanov said.

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#### US Stocks Close Lower Due to Fears of Inflation Despite Positive Jobs Reports

NEW YORK, June 3 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street closed lower on Thursday as worries about inflation triggered risk aversion across US financial markets, despite a jobs market showing rapid recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, closed at 34,577, down 23.34 points or 0.1 percent.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, closed at 4,193, down 15 points or 0.4 percent.

The Nasdaq Composite index, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, closed at 13,615, down 142 points or 1.0 percent. Nasdaq has been Wall Street's biggest loser of late, sliding 1 percent since the start of June after finishing May down 1.5 percent for its first monthly loss since November.

The US economy grew by an annualized rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Federal Reserve said it expects a 6.5 percent growth this year.

However, the prices of almost all commodities and services have increased as reflected in the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, which jumped 3.6 percent in April compared to the same month in 2020. The scenario has alarmed economists into believing that inflation growth in 2021 could be the highest in 35 years.

Thursday's slide on Wall Street came despite the Labor Department reporting that about 385,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, the lowest number since March of 2020.

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#### US Court Reverses Trump-Era Denial of Endangered Species Protection to Pacific Walruses

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - An earlier district court decision that upheld a Trump administration decision to remove the Pacific walrus as a candidate for the endangered or threatened species list has been reversed, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on Thursday. In 2011, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) found that listing the Pacific walrus as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was warranted. However, in 2017, after reviewing the assessment, FWS issued a finding that the Pacific walrus no longer qualified as a threatened species. The Court held that FWS did not sufficiently explain why it changed its prior position.

"We find that the Service did not sufficiently explain why it changed its prior position. We therefore reverse the district court's grant of summary judgment to the Service," Circuit Judge Andrew Hurwitz said in the court's written opinion.

Initially, FWS found the loss of sea-ice threatened the Pacific walrus, without which walruses would be required to live on coastal land. Prey would be depleted around the increasingly concentrated walrus populations, causing them to travel greater distances in search of food, in turn, causing decreased body weight, calf abandonment, and other sources of increased mortality.

The 2017 review of the assessment then concluded that although sea ice loss is impacting Pacific walruses, other stressors that were identified in 2011 have declined in magnitude. The review team believed the creatures to be adaptable to dynamic environments, having demonstrated the ability to adjust their distribution and habitat use patterns in response to shifting patterns of sea ice.

The Ninth Circuit reversed the summary judgment of the lower district court, directing them to remand to FWS to provide a sufficient explanation for its change in position.

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#### US Approves \$3.3Bn Apache Helicopter Sale to Australia - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved the sale of 29 Apache ground support helicopters and related equipment to Australia, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a release on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Australia of AH-64E Apache Helicopters and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$3.5 billion," the release said. "The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today."

Australia has requested to buy 29 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters, but also engines, modernized target acquisition and designation sight and pilot night vision sensors and fire control radars with electronic units, the release said. The package also includes modernized radar frequency interferometers, common missile warning systems and very high frequency radios, the release added.

The deal also covers the sale of 85 Hellfire missiles; 29 Hellfire air training missiles and 2,000 advanced precision kill weapon system guidance sections, according to the release.

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UPDATE - Biden Admin. Says Bans 59 Chinese Military, Surveillance Firms From Getting US Investments

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has banned 59 Chinese military and surveillance firms from acquiring US investors or investments, expanding an original list of 44 Chinese companies targeted in a November executive order, the White House announced on Thursday.

Accusing the 59 companies of activities gravely detrimental to America and its allies, Biden's expanded order was a further step toward estranging US-Sino relations, already troubled during the years of his predecessor Donald Trump. "This E.O. allows the United States to prohibit – in a targeted and scoped manner – US investments in Chinese companies that undermine the security or democratic values of the United States and our allies," the White House said, referring to the directive signed by Biden, that expands on an original executive order by Trump. Specifically, US persons will be prohibited "from engaging in the purchase or sale of any publicly traded securities" with the listed Chinese companies or individuals determined to be connected with them, White House added.

Biden separately wrote to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who leads his Democratic Party in Congress, to inform her of the matter.

"I find that the use of Chinese surveillance technology outside the PRC and the development or use of Chinese surveillance technology to facilitate repression or serious human rights abuse constitute unusual and extraordinary threats, which have their source in whole or substantial part outside the United States, to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States, and I hereby expand the scope of the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13959 to address those threats," Biden said in a letter to Pelosi.

The expanded US action against the Chinese military and surveillance firms came hours after China's Vice Premier Liu He hailed earlier on Thursday in Beijing the resumption of "normal

discussions" with the United States, after he held two video calls with U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen within a week.

Biden, who took office in January, has had a rocky start to his relationship with China. Beijing had expected friendlier ties with Washington after a bruising patch with Trump who called the COVID-19, which originally broke out in Wuhan, a "Chinese virus" and also carried out on an 18-month trade war with China, while targeting Chinese businesses for alleged spying on US interests.

Biden, who has undone most of Trump's executive orders on immigration, climate and other matters, has left intact his predecessor's tariffs, indicating he might use them to pressure Beijing into making concessions on trade and other issues.

Biden also surprised China by recently directing the US intelligence community to redouble efforts to investigate the origins of COVID-19 and to report their findings to him in 90 days — an action analysts said could aggravate anti-Asian sentiment in the United States and potentially worldwide.

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US Scientists Identify Potential New Antiviral Drug for COVID-19 - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - A study with cell cultures suggests that the experimental drug Tempol may be a promising antiviral treatment for COVID-19, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Thursday.

"Tempol can limit SARS-CoV-2 infection by impairing the activity of a viral enzyme called RNA replicase," the NIH said in a press release.

RNA replicase allows the coronavirus to replicate its genome and make copies of itself once inside a cell, the release said.

In cell culture experiments with live coronavirus, the study team found that the drug can inhibit viral replication, the release added.

Tempol has previously been tested in animals as a treatment for other diseases. The study team plans on conducting additional animal studies and will seek opportunities to evaluate Tempol in a clinical study of COVID-19, according to the release.

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Myanmar Has Not Granted US Access to Detained American Journalist - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States has not had access to American journalist Danny Fenster after he was detained by Myanmar's military junta, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

Fenster, 37, worked as the managing editor of the Frontier Myanmar news magazine. He was detained on May 24 at Yangon International Airport before he could board a plane to leave the country. It is unknown whether he will face charges.

"We are deeply concerned over the detentions of Daniel Fenster and Nathan Maung, both of whom were working as journalists in Burma," Price said in a press briefing. "We've pressed the military regime to release them immediately...our consular officers most recently conducted a virtual visit with Nathan Hmong on May 24. We've also sought to visit Daniel Fenster, but we haven't been afforded access to him by regime officials."

Price said the United States will also continue to press Myanmar's military junta to release all journalists detained in the country.

Amnesty International recently reported that some 88 journalists have been arrested since the February 1 coup in Myanmar. About 33 of them are in hiding and more than half of them are in detention. Two journalists have been injured by gunfire while the unrest.

The military in Myanmar seized control of the nation in a coup d'état on February 1, 2021. There have been mass protests since the coup was staged. On the other hand, the military authorities assert that it was justified and vow to transfer power after a new election, the date for which however is yet to be given.

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US Support for Israel 'Ironclad' Regardless of Possible Government Reshuffle - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue its "ironclad" support for Israel irrespective of possible government changes there, the State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"Regardless of what government is in place, our stalwart support, our ironclad support for Israel will remain... Nothing about that will change even if there is a change in government," Price said during a daily briefing.

On Wednesday, Israel's opposition leaders announced that they succeeded in setting up a broad coalition that may oust Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after 12 years of uninterrupted rule.

Price declined to comment on the government formation in Israel "while it is in process."

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UPDATE 2 - US Government Official Sentenced for Disclosing Sensitive Information - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - A US Treasury Department official has been sentenced to six months in prison for illegally disclosing sensitive information pertaining to reports on Paul

Manafort, Richard Gates, the Russian Embassy, Maria Butina, and Prevezon Alexander among others, the Justice Department announced on Thursday.

"Audrey Strauss, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced that Natalie Mayflower Sours Edwards... a former Senior Advisor at the Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network ("FinCEN"), was sentenced to six months in federal prison for unlawfully disclosing Suspicious Activity Reports ("SARs") and other sensitive information," the Justice Department said.

FinCEN manages SARs related to suspicious financial activity, which, US financial institutions and other parties are legally required to deliver to the government. Willful disclosure of a SAR or its contents by government employees or agents outside of an official capacity is a felony offense.

Between October 2017 and her arrest in October 2018, Edwards unlawfully disclosed numerous SARs to BuzzFeed reporter Jason Leopold, the contents of which were published by BuzzFeed. Additionally, Edwards sent or described internal correspondence that contained confidential personal information, business information, and security assessments to Leopold.

Edwards, who pled guilty to the crime, was sentenced to three years of supervised release in addition to the six months in prison.

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US Plans Global Climate Monitoring With Sensors on Commercial Aircraft – Weather Service

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said Thursday it plans to install three air sampling inlets on a single Boeing 737 jet to test plans for a global network that would monitor greenhouse gases with sensors on passenger aircraft.

"This is a first step toward an expansion of NOAA's global atmospheric sampling network to include commercial airliners in the U.S. and International airlines in these critical data-gathering efforts," a NOAA press release said.

In the coming weeks, scientists with NOAA's Global Monitoring Laboratory will oversee installation of three different air sampling inlet configurations on an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737-9 jet, the release said.

"Standardizing the location and installation of greenhouse gas monitoring instruments on commercial aircraft will be an important first step in expanding our sampling network to provide data for scientists and policymakers interested in understanding greenhouse gas emissions that are driving climate change," lead scientist for NOAA's aircraft measurements program, Colm Sweeney, said in the release.

NOAA hopes installation of sensors on commercial aircraft will augment data from its 50 ground based sampling stations around the world and from private aircraft hired by the agency, according to the release.

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NASA Sends Baby Squid to Space Station to Study Impact of Space Flight on Human Health

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – The successful launch of the 22nd commercial resupply system to the International Space Station on Tuesday included baby squid with immune systems similar to humans to study the impact of long-term spaceflight, NASA said.

The 2 tons of pressurized cargo in the SpaceX cargo capsule hurled aloft on a Falcon 9 rocket included two sets of animals, including 128 baby bobtail squid.

Experiments with the squid could support the development of protective measures to preserve astronaut health during long space missions, since humans rely on microbes to maintain healthy digestive and immune systems, NASA scientists said in a pre-flight briefings.

A second animal experiment involves microscopic animals known as tardigrades, eight leg creatures that resemble baby bears, which were chosen for their ability to adopt to extreme conditions, including in the vacuum of outer space for a short time, according to NASA.

The Cargo Dragon capsule is slated to arrive at the Space Station Saturday morning.

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**CORRECTION - Biden Admin. Bans 59 Chinese Military, Surveillance Firms From Getting US Investments**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has banned 59 Chinese military and surveillance firms from acquiring US investors or investments, the White House announced on Thursday.

"Today, President Biden signed an Executive Order to further address the ongoing national emergency declared in ... November 12, 2020 with respect to the threat posed by the military-industrial complex of the People's Republic of China," the White House said in a statement. The current executive order will "prohibit – in a targeted and scoped manner – US investments in Chinese companies that undermine the security or democratic values of the United States and our allies."

Specifically, US persons will be prohibited "from engaging in the purchase or sale of any publicly traded securities" with the listed Chinese companies or individuals determined to be connected with them, the statement said.

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**US Expects More Rounds of Iran Nuclear Agreement Talks - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States expects the sixth and additional rounds of negotiations on the resumption of the Iranian nuclear agreement, US State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"The fifth round has now concluded. We have always said that this will be a set of negotiations that spans multiple rounds. We expect there will be a sixth. I think there is just about every expectation there will be subsequent rounds beyond that," Price said during a press briefing. Price added that progress has been made during the multilateral talks in Vienna, but a few challenges remain for Iran and the United States to resume compliance with the agreement that was abandoned by former US President Donald Trump.

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**Biden Bans 59 Chinese Military, Surveillance Firms From US Securities Trading**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has banned 59 Chinese military and surveillance firms from trading in US securities, the White House announced on Thursday.

"Today, President Biden signed an Executive Order to further address the ongoing national emergency declared in ... November 12, 2020 with respect to the threat posed by the military-industrial complex of the People's Republic of China," the White House said in a statement. It said the 59 names listed in the current order "prohibit – in a targeted and scoped manner – U.S. investments in Chinese companies that undermine the security or democratic values of the United States and our allies."

The executive order also prohibits "United States persons from engaging in the purchase or sale of any publicly traded securities" with the listed Chinese companies or individuals determined to be connected with them, the statement said.

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**Sullivan in Talks With Israel Defense Chief Pushes Issue of Aid Reaching Gaza - NSC**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan underscored during a meeting with Israel Defense Minister Benny Gantz the importance of ensuring humanitarian aid reaches Palestinians in Gaza, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Thursday.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met today in Washington with Israeli Minister of Defense Benjamin 'Benny' Gantz to discuss recent developments in the region... They exchanged views on the current situation in Gaza and Mr. Sullivan highlighted the importance of ensuring that immediate humanitarian aid is able to reach the people of Gaza," Horne said in a press release.

Sullivan reaffirmed President Joe Biden's commitment to replenish Israel's Iron Dome air and missile defense system, Horne said.

In addition, Sullivan and Gantz discussed mutual issues concerning Iran and their commitment to counter Tehran's activities in the Middle East, Horne added.

The United States and Israel will remain in close contact in the weeks ahead as the two nations work to advance their strategic priorities in the region, according to Horne.

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UN 'Very Much' Welcomes US Move to Donate 19Mln Vaccine Doses to COVAX - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes the decision by the Biden administration to share some 19 million coronavirus vaccine doses via the COVAX facility in order to be used in developing countries, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Biden said the United States will allocate 25 million vaccines for increased global coverage, 75 percent of which will be donated through COVAX to Latin America, South Asia and Africa.

"We very much welcome that move. It is very, very important for wealthy, developed countries to share as much as possible with COVAX," Dujarric said.

The COVAX initiative, aimed to provide equitable access to coronavirus vaccines globally, is falling short in efforts to obtain funding, Dujarric said.

COVAX urgently requires \$2 billion in donor contributions in addition to the \$6.3 billion that have already been pledged.

The United States had earlier committed \$4 billion to support the COVAX facility.

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UPDATE: Biden Announces Framework to Share 80Mln Coronavirus Vaccine Doses Globally

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will begin distributing the first 25 million doses of its surplus coronavirus vaccines as part of the global framework to share 80 million doses by the end of the month, US President Joe Biden said in a release on Thursday.

"Today, the administration announced its framework for sharing at least 80 million US vaccine doses globally by the end of June and the plan for the first 25 million doses," the release said.

The United States will first distribute 6 million vaccine doses to South and Central America and then 7 million doses to Asia and 5 million doses to Africa via the COVAX facility, the release said.

The other 6 million doses will be distributed among the US partners and allies, including South Korea, Mexico, Ukraine, Iraq, West Bank and Gaza Strip, the release added.

Biden had promised one million vaccine doses to South Korean President Moon Jae-in during his visit to Washington, are expected to be delivered to Seoul tomorrow, the White House COVID-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients said during a briefing on Thursday.

At the same time, Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan during a briefing earlier in the day pointed out that Washington is not imposing any conditions for the vaccine deliveries in contrast to what other countries allegedly do.

The batch of 25 million doses includes vaccines that have been given emergency authorization by the US Food and Drug Administration from manufacturers Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, while 60 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine are still awaiting the results of the agency's safety review.

In March, the Biden administration loaned 4 million doses of the unauthorized AstraZeneca vaccines to Canada and Mexico.

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US Voting Machine Maker to Install Ballot Monitor Software to Confirm Accuracy - Microsoft

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - Hart InterCivic, a maker of US voting systems, and Microsoft formed a partnership to install newly developed ElectionGuard software that promises to make future elections more secure and verifiable, the companies said on Thursday.

"The partnership makes Hart the first major voting machine manufacturer in the United States to provide end-to-end verifiability to voters, giving individual voters the ability to confirm their ballots were counted in an election and not altered," the companies said in a joint press release.

End-to-end verifiability provided by the Microsoft-developed software will also enable election officials to independently confirm the accuracy of the overall vote count, the release said.

Hart, whose Verity voting system is currently used by more than 500 jurisdictions in 17 US states, will launch a series of pilot tests in which voters will fill out paper ballots with a Verity marking device and given a verification code.

Once the election is complete, voters can check their verification code on a web portal to confirm their ballot was counted in the final election results, with encryption keeping people's votes secret.

Concerns over vote-count accuracy clouded recent US elections, with former President Donald Trump continuing to insist he won the 2020 election but his victory was stolen due to massive election and voter fraud.

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Canada, Allies Urge Iran to Set Date for Downed Airline Reparations Talks - Statement

TORONTO, June 3 (Sputnik) - Canada and three other nations affected by the downing of the Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS752 by Iran are calling on Tehran to schedule a date to formally begin negotiations on reparations, the International Coordination and Response Group for the victims of Flight PS752 said on Thursday.

"We now call on Iran to work with us to set a date to formally begin negotiations on reparations," the group, which included the foreign ministers of Canada, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, said in a joint statement.

The four nations also made a series of demands on Iran, including to fully acknowledge wrongdoing, publicly apologize, give assurances such an incident would never happen again and prosecute those deemed responsible for the downing of the passenger airplane.

Afghanistan and Germany, whose citizens were also onboard the airplane, initially were part of the group but did not sign the statement.

Flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran's international airport on January 8, 2020, after being shot down by the Iranian military. The incident claimed the lives of all 167 passengers - mostly Canadian and Iranian passengers - and nine Ukrainian crew members. Tehran has admitted that its missile brought down the passenger jet, however rejects allegations that the strike was premeditated. The Iranian military maintains it was on high alert at the time of the accident, which happened hours after it fired missiles at two US bases in Iraq in retaliation for the drone strike that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.

Despite Iran's Civil Aviation Organization concluding last month that PS752 was brought down inadvertently, a Canadian court ruled last month that Iran had deliberately downed the Ukrainian airliner - deeming the incident an act of terrorism under the Criminal Code of Canada.

Tehran slammed the Ontario Superior Court of Justice's as baseless and politically motivated. Legal analysts told Sputnik that Canadian Justice Edward Belobaba's ruling is "contradictory" as it fails to account for the fact that most of the passengers were either Iranian nationals or dual-citizens.

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**US VP Harris Says \$1Bln in Funding For Tribal Internet Development Now Available**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The \$1 billion in funding allocated for developing high-speed, broadband internet access in native communities across the US in the COVID-19 Relief legislation passed back in December are, as of today, available for use, Vice President Kamala Harris announced on Thursday.

"Congress worked together, as it should, across aisles and chambers, to include nearly \$1 billion for tribal broadband infrastructure programs in our bill. And today, I am proud to announce that those funds are available for use," Harris said.

The funding, distributed through grants, can be used to lay fiber-optic cables, establish digital literacy programs, and create apprenticeship and job training programs in the field. It is part of

the Biden administration's broader effort to provide affordable, high-speed internet access to every American.

Harris added that the pandemic widened the so-called "digital divide" between those with internet access and those without it, particularly in rural and tribal areas. She mentioned, among other problems, the negative impact of internet inaccessibility on schoolchildren who had to study remotely due to COVID-related measures.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland noted that the funding marks a major stepping stone in the Biden administration's effort to ensure that the US government lives up to its responsibilities to the country's tribal communities.

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**US Oil Stocks Down 5Mln Barrels Last Week on Gasoline Pump Up Ahead Summer Driving Start**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles fell by just over 5 million barrels last week, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported on Thursday, announcing a drop twice more than anticipated by industry analysts as refiners focused on gasoline production ahead of the start of the summer driving season.

Inventories of crude oil fell by 5.08 million barrels during the week ended May 28, the EIA reported, versus the drawdown of 2.53 million barrels forecast by analysts polled by US media. The crude drawdown for the week ended May 28 was noteworthy as it came just before the three-day break that followed into the May 31 Memorial Day holiday, which unofficially marked the start of the peak summer driving season in the United States.

The American Automobile Association says that as many as 37 million travelers could have taken to the road for this year's Memorial Day, up 60 percent from last year's pandemic-suppressed number of 23 million. Those driving over the three-day stretch usually fill their tanks more than once, typically resulting in a boon for gasoline consumption.

But while crude stockpiles fell, gasoline inventories actually rose last week, according to the EIA, which reported a gain of almost 1.5 million barrels in this category, versus a drawdown of just as much forecast by the market.

Analysts, however, pointed to the May 28 cut-off for the EIA data, which came just before the three-day break that followed into Memorial Day. The next weekly dataset from the agency would likely show a surge in gasoline consumption, they said.

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**IMF Says Increase in Global Food, Fuel Prices to Exacerbate Crisis in Yemen**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Thursday that the humanitarian crisis in Yemen will worsen as global food and fuel prices continue to rise and put additional pressure on the country challenging prospects for economic recovery. "Continued financing of the fiscal deficit by the central bank and resultant exchange rate depreciation, together with rising international food and fuel prices, will contribute to further rapid inflation," IMF official Brett Rayner said in a press release. "Rising international prices will also increase pressure on the balance of payments and reserves."

Yemen's near-term economic prospects are dim as the coronavirus pandemic continues and its output is expected to sink a further 2 percent this year after dropping 8.5 percent in 2020, Rayner, who leads an IMF team on a virtual mission with Yemeni authorities from May 24 to June 3, said.

Yemen needs additional external financing and to accelerate the process of rebuilding institutions in order to curb depreciation and inflation, Rayner said. Reducing Yemen's dependency on the central bank for financing would allow the country to raise its domestic revenues, allowing it to spend on basic good, healthcare and education to benefit the Yemeni people, he added.

Yemen has experienced severe humanitarian crisis during the ongoing armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi and the Houthi movement. The situation has been further complicated after the Saudi-led coalition launched a military campaign against the Houthis in 2015, resulting in a humanitarian catastrophe.

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#### UNSC Unanimously Votes to Extend Vessels Inspection Off Libya By Another Year

UNITED NATIONS, June 3 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Thursday unanimously adopted a resolution giving authorization for another year to inspect vessels suspected of violating the arms embargo on Libya.

The adopted resolution "decides to extend the authorizations as out in resolution 2526 (2020) [to inspect vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya suspected of violating that country's arms embargo] for a further 12 months."

The document recalls the imposition of the UN arms embargo which banned Libya from exporting any arms materials and obliged UN member states to prevent the supply of all weaponry to the North African county.

The UN Security Council imposed the measure in 2011 against the use of mercenaries in a brutal civil war following the ouster and assassination of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

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#### Blinken Discusses With Israel Defense Minister Security Needs, Aid to Palestinians

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters on Thursday that he will discuss with Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz the United States' assistance for the Palestinians as well as Israeli security needs in the wake of the recent clashes in Gaza.

Blinken said he will discuss with Gantz the United States' "enduring commitment to Israel's security" and "some of the needs that Israel has in that regard."

According to US Senator Lindsey Graham, Israel is asking the US government for \$1 billion in aid to replenish the Iron Dome air defense system that was used to intercept rockets during the latest stand-off with Palestinian militant groups. The hostilities lasted for 11 days and ended in a ceasefire on May 20.

Blinken also said that he will speak to Gantz about "the work that needs to be done to move forward on humanitarian assistance to and reconstruction for Gaza and for Palestinians."

Gantz responded that he is looking for a combination of measures in place "between moving forward with construction and making sure that everything stays secure."

The Israeli Defense Minister also said that he will address in his discussions in Washington the challenges Israel faces with respect to Iran and the Palestinians.

"We convey Israel's appreciation for the administration, for the President, for yourself for the ongoing support which is very important for us in our challenging area," he said.

Gantz arrived for a day of talks with Blinken, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan as part of a strategic dialogue which focuses on Iran with Israel continuing to oppose American-led efforts to revive the nuclear deal.

On Wednesday, Israel's opposition leaders announced that they have succeeded in setting up a coalition that may dethrone Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Gantz and his centrist Kahol Lavan party is part of an emerging government where he is expected to retain the Defense Ministry portfolio.

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Harris Notifies Foreign Leaders of US Plans to Share 25M In COVID-19 Vaccines - White House

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris has notified the heads of Mexico, Guatemala, India and the Caribbean Community countries of the United States' plans to distribute 25 million doses of coronavirus vaccines, White House chief spokesperson Symone Sanders said on Thursday.

"Vice President Kamala D. Harris spoke this morning to President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of Mexico, President Alejandro Giammattei of Guatemala, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and Prime Minister Keith Rowley, Chairman of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)," Sanders said in a statement. "In four separate calls, the Vice President notified each of the leaders that the Biden-Harris Administration will begin sharing the first 25 million doses of COVID vaccines to their respective countries and others, as part of the Biden-Harris administration's framework for sharing at least 80 million vaccines globally by the end of June."

The calls come upon the announcement by President Joe Biden that the United States will share at least 80 million vaccine doses globally by the end of June and the plan for the first 25 million doses.

"The Vice President reiterated that the Administration's efforts are focused on achieving broad global coverage, responding to surges and other urgent situations and public health needs, and helping as many countries as possible who requested vaccines," Sanders said. "The four leaders thanked the Vice President, and they agreed to continue working together to address COVID-19 and advance our mutual interests around the world."

Biden noted that some 19 million out of 25 million doses will be shared through COVAX, with some 6 million doses sent to Latin America and the Caribbean, about 7 million sent to South and Southeast Asia, and some 5 million for Africa.

The President also revealed that the remaining doses, some over 6 million, will be shared directly with Canada, Mexico, Ukraine, Gaza, and South Korea.

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**Learjet wins \$465M In Contract for 6 Battlefield Communication Aircraft - US Air Force**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - Learjet will provide six aircraft loaded with electronics to serve as airborne communication nodes under a five-year, \$464.8 million contract, the US Air Force said on Thursday.

"These aircraft are required for continuous operations outside the contiguous United States in multiple theaters of operation," Battlefield Airborne Communications Node (BACN) program lead Elizabeth Rosa said in a press release.

Because of its flexible deployment options and ability to operate at high altitudes, BACN equipped planes allow air and surface forces to overcome communications difficulties caused by mountains, rough terrain, or distance, the release said.

The addition of six aircraft will expand the current fleet of seven planes equipped with the BACN payload. The aircraft are based at Hanscom Air Force Base in the US state of Massachusetts, according to the release.

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**US, Japan Pledge Deeper Cooperation in Digital Connectivity - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan are enhancing their cooperation in digital connectivity, the US State Department announced on Thursday after representatives from the governments met virtually to launch the US-Japan Global Digital Connectivity Partnership (GDCCP).

"The GDCP deepens bilateral cooperation on the digital economy and next-generation digital technology issues," the State Department said in a statement, citing an initiative borne out of the April 16 summit between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga.

Delegations from both governments will convene an expert-level working group multiple times per year within the structure of the US-Japan Policy Cooperation Dialogue on the Internet Economy, the statement said.

The GDCP will build upon previous cooperation by elevating and expanding the scope of discussions to promote secure connectivity and vibrant digital economies, the statement added. The initiative will promote digital cooperation in third countries across the Indo-Pacific, Africa, Latin America and other regions; enhance collaboration in multilateral fora; and boost forward-looking US-Japanese mechanisms that catalyze investment in fifth-generation wireless technologies, next-generation telecommunications and corresponding research and development, according to the statement.

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#### Biden Suggests 15% Floor for US Corporate Taxes Instead of 28% - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has offered to create a new tax floor of 15 percent for US businesses in an attempt to appease rival Republican lawmakers opposed to his initial plan to raise the corporate tax rate to 28 percent, the Washington Post reported on Thursday.

Biden's new offer was a major concession after Republicans said his earlier proposal to lift the corporate tax rate from 21 percent to 28 percent, which would unwind the tax cuts the Republicans adopted in 2017, amounted to a "nonstarter," the report said.

On Wednesday, Biden signaled he would support significant revisions to his tax proposal to win Republican backing on a broader infrastructure package, outlining a plan for about \$1 trillion in new spending financed through tax changes that do not appear to raise the top corporate rate, the report said.

Biden had recommended the new minimum rate to take aim at dozens of profitable US corporations that pay little to nothing in taxes, the report said.

The White House has also proposed stepping up enforcement on corporations and wealthy earners who rely on loopholes to lessen their tax burdens, the report added.

The new corporate tax rate suggested by Biden appeared to be in line with the 15 percent minimum for global company taxes that the US Treasury proposed last month to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

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#### World Bank, IMF Chiefs Call on G7 to Release Surplus COVID-19 Vaccines

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – The Group of Seven (G7) leading industrial nations must ensure everyone, including the populations of all developing nations have access to the vaccines needed to protect them against the global COVID-19 pandemic, the president of the World Bank and the managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Thursday.

“The coronavirus pandemic will not end until everyone has access to vaccines, including people in developing countries,” World Bank Group President David Malpass and IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said in a joint statement. “Worldwide access to vaccines offers the best hope for stopping the coronavirus pandemic, saving lives and securing a broad-based economic recovery.”

Together with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank Group and IMF have urged international support for \$50 billion of financing aimed at achieving more equitable access to vaccines and thus helping to end the pandemic everywhere, Malpass and Georgieva noted.

“The World Bank Group and the IMF call on countries anticipating excess vaccine supplies in the coming months to release their surplus doses and options as soon as possible, in a transparent manner, to developing countries with adequate distribution plans in place. We are urging developing countries to move quickly to put in place vaccine procurement and distribution plans,” they said.

The World Bank and the IMF, working closely with WHO, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Gavi and vaccine manufacturers, are supporting countries in the development and financing of such plans, Malpass and Georgieva said.

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US Airline Fuel Consumption During Pandemic Hits New High - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - Fuel burned by US airlines in April hit the highest level since the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, rising nearly 4 percent from the previous month, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Thursday.

“US airlines used 3.7 percent more fuel in April 2021 than in March 2021 to reach the highest monthly consumption level since March 2020,” the BTS said in a press release.

Airlines used more than twice the amount of fuel that they did in April 2020 and 70 percent of the fuel they used in April 2019, prior to the pandemic, the release also said.

In recent months US airlines have added flights and filled planes amid a surge in leisure travel by Americans, according to published reports.

The BTS reported earlier that March produced the first year-over-year increase in passengers during the coronavirus pandemic.

Passenger volumes also posted a pandemic-high during the just completed Memorial Day holiday, when the Transportation Security Administration reported screening an average of 1.78 million people from Friday through Monday - a six fold increase from a year ago.

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Harris Notifies Foreign Leaders of US Plans to Share 25Mln COVID-19 Vaccines - White House

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"Vice President Kamala D. Harris spoke this morning to President Andres Manuel López Obrador of Mexico, President Alejandro Giammattei of Guatemala, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and Prime Minister Keith Rowley, Chairman of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)," Sanders said in a statement. "In four separate calls, the Vice President notified each of the leaders that the Biden-Harris Administration will begin sharing the first 25 million doses of COVID vaccines to their respective countries and others, as part of the Biden-Harris administration's framework for sharing at least 80 million vaccines globally by the end of June."

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OPCW Probed Some 77 Alleged Cases of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria - Director-General

UNITED NATIONS, June 3 (Sputnik) - The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact-Finding Mission in Syria has already investigated 77 cases of likely or confirmed use of chemical weapons in the country, OPCW Director-General Fernando Arias said on Thursday.

"To date, the Fact-Finding Mission has investigated 77 allegations," Arias told the UN Security Council. "Seventy-seven, already, of chemical weapons use, and determined likely or confirmed use of chemical weapons in Syria."

Throughout the Syrian conflict, ongoing since 2011, Western countries and their allies have accused Damascus of using chemical weapons against the country's civilian population. The Syrian government has been continuously denying these allegations.

In 2014, the OPCW set up the Fact-Finding Mission to establish the truth about the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Russia and Syria have repeatedly questioned OPCW findings, saying they are biased and used as a political tool by the Western countries.

The Syrian government has noted that the full destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal was confirmed by the OPCW in 2016.

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### Biden to Meet UK Prime Minister June 10 During First Overseas Trip - White House

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on June 10 during his first overseas trip as head of state, the White House announced on Thursday.

"President Biden will meet British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on June 10 to affirm the enduring strength of the special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom," the White House said in a statement.

During the trip, Biden will also attend the G7 Summit in Cornwall June 11-13 and hold bilateral meetings with the G7 leaders.

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### Biden Says US to Send Some 6Mln Coronavirus Vaccines to Partners Including Mexico, Ukraine

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will deliver some 6 million coronavirus vaccine doses to its partners, including to Mexico, Ukraine, Iraq and the Gaza Strip, US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday.

"Today, we're providing more detail on how we will allocate the first 25 million of those vaccines to lay the ground for increased global coverage and to address real and potential surges, high burdens of disease, and the needs of the most vulnerable countries," Biden said in a statement.

"The remaining doses, just over 6 million, will be shared directly with countries experiencing surges, those in crisis, and other partners and neighbors, including Canada, Mexico, India and the Republic of Korea."

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### Biden Announces Framework to Share 80Mln Coronavirus Vaccine Doses Globally

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - United States will begin to share 80 million doses of its coronavirus vaccines globally by the end of the month, President Joe Biden said in a release on Thursday.

"Today, the administration announced its framework for sharing at least 80 million US vaccine doses globally by the end of June and the plan for the first 25 million doses," the release said. The United States will first distribute 6 million vaccine doses to South and Central America and then 7 million doses to Asia and 5 million doses to Africa via the COVAX facility.

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US Establishes Countering Corruption as Core National Security Interest - Biden

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is establishing the fight against corruption as a core national security interest, President Joe Biden said upon issuing a National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) on Thursday.

"In issuing this National Security Study Memorandum, I establish countering corruption as a core United States national security interest," Biden said in a statement. "With this Memorandum, I am directing departments and agencies to make recommendations that will significantly bolster the ability of the US government to combat corruption."

Biden noted that corruption is a risk to US national security and must be recognized as such because it attacks the foundations of democratic institutions, drives and intensifies extremism and makes it easier for authoritarian regimes to corrode democratic governance.

"Fighting corruption is not just good governance. It is self-defense. It is patriotism, and it is essential to the preservation of our democracy and our future," Biden said, adding that strengthening the resilience of rights-respecting democracies is one of the defining challenges of "our era."

The US president said the United States will lead by example and in partnership with allies, civil society and the private sector to fight corruption in what amounts to be a mission for the entire world.

"[W]e must all stand in support of courageous citizens around the globe who are demanding honest, transparent governance," he said.

US agencies are expected to complete a review on countering corruption within 200 days of the date of the Memorandum and the National Security Advisor to submit a report and recommendations to the president for further direction and action.

Speaking to reporters ahead of the release of the Memorandum, a senior Biden administration official said the United States will expand its law enforcement action against corrupt actors throughout the world.

"We are looking to make significant and systemic changes to the regulatory structure that governs illicit finance. We are looking to increase the use of law enforcement tools to go after corrupt actors," the official said.

The official explained that sanctions will be an important though not the only part of the conversation about countering corruption between the US government and its international partners. The United States is considering improving its foreign assistance and diplomatic efforts as tools in the fight against corruption, the official added.

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THROUGH COVAX, US TO DISTRIBUTE 6MLN COVID VACCINE DOSES TO SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA, 7MLN TO ASIA, 5MLN TO AFRICA - WHITE HOUSE

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#### Biden to Meet With Erdogan on Sidelines of NATO Summit in Brussels

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will discuss "bilateral and regional issues" with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during their meeting on the margins of the NATO summit on June 14, the White House announced on Thursday.

"The President will also meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss the full range of bilateral and regional issues," the White House said in a statement.

The meeting will take place in Brussels, Belgium, where both leaders will be attending the NATO Summit on June 14.

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#### US Supreme Court Rules in Favor of Police in Computer Database Abuse Case

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - A former police officer who violated department policy by misusing his authorization to search a law enforcement database for personal reasons did not violate federal computer laws, the US Supreme Court held in a Thursday decision.

Nathan Van Buren, a former police sergeant, ran a license-plate search in a law enforcement computer database in exchange for \$5,000 in what turned out to be an FBI sting operation. The Federal Government then charged and convicted him with a felony violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which Van Buren appealed all the way to the Supreme Court.

"We must decide whether Van Buren also violated the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986 (CFAA), which makes it illegal 'to access a computer with authorization and to use such access to obtain or alter information in the computer that the accesser is not entitled so to obtain or alter.' He did not," Justice Amy Coney Barrett wrote in the majority opinion.

The ruling in favor of Van Buren holds that while he did access the database for improper purposes, he nonetheless had authorization to access and use the database, which means he cannot be in violation of the CFAA with its current wording.

The decision, from which Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, and John Roberts dissented, reverses an Eleventh Circuit decision and remands the case for further proceedings consistent with the court's decision.